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Recommended Citation

Baptiste, Ian (1998). "Towards A Pedagogy for Disempowering Our Enemies," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/3>

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Towards A Pedagogy for Disempowering Our Enemies

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Abstract. Adult educators seem hesitant to disempower anyone, including their enemies. This is because our humanist moorings makes us believe that all forms of disempowerment is evil. Proposed are rudiments of a pedagogy of ethical disempowerment, which I contend we desperately need.

Introduction

Most adult educators care about people. However, how, and to whom, we direct our caring varies considerably. Some of us focus entirely on individuals. Others prefer to address the concerns of individuals within the context of groups to which they belong. Some educators focus primarily on the material well-being of persons while others dwell on their psychological, socio-cultural, or spiritual well-being. But whatever our ethic of caring, and whatever the ends to which we direct our efforts, most of us seem to believe that caring could be actualize *wholly* through pedagogies of empowerment.

Our pedagogies of empowerment differ with our ethics of caring, but it appears that most of us are united by a humanist posture which treats disempowerment as an *ipso facto* evil. Quite often, we delude ourselves by acting as if, in our practice, we encounter no real enemies—only allies and misguided persons. If that were the case, a pedagogy of empowerment alone would suffice. However, we often encounter real enemies—people who intentionally frustrate our causes. In such cases, I argue, caring demands, not just a pedagogy of empowerment, but also a pedagogy for disempowering our enemies.

Ethics of Caring in Adult Education: Different But the Same

Below, I examine three dominant ethics of caring in adult education and conclude that all are wedded to a naive romanticism which regards all forms of disempowerment as evil. They are: a) caring as human capital formation, b) caring as self-improvement and c) caring as empowering our allies. These are not distinct categories. Quite often, people practice them in combination. For instance, some educators emphasize human capital formation as a way to empower their allies. Others employ an overt curriculum aimed at assisting learners to increase their marketability, and a hidden (covert) curriculum intended to foster critical reflection. These groupings are merely areas of emphasis, not exclusive domains. The reader is advised to remember this while reading this section.

Caring as human capital formation. Capital is any *produced* means of production. The term human capital refers to those skills, attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, etc., which are developed primarily for their economic (material) value. In economic jargon, it is "the present value of past investments in the skills of people" (Blaug, 1970, p. 19). Human capital takes many forms--improvement in our education, health, social networking; relocation to areas with better job prospects, and so on. Human capital formation is the name given to the process by which such capital is deliberately developed; and the expenditure (in time, money, etc.) is called human capital investment (Becker, 1962, p. 9).

Some (maybe most) adult educators express their caring through a focus on human capital formation. Their primary concern is to improve and/or increase the marketability of individuals. Advocates of this view populate such areas as workforce education, human resource development, learning organization, traditional approaches to adult literacy, and so on (Carnevale, et. al., 1988; Harris, 1997; Kirsch, et. al., 1993; Niemi, 1992; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Most of these adult educators treat persons as autonomous, dis-interested individuals, rather than as interdependent, self-interested members of groups. They also generally imply that we live in an economic meritocracy—meaning that our

earnings are based primarily on merit, not favor. This dis-interested, and meritocratic stance allows them to presume a one-to-one causal relationship between the amount of human capital one possesses and one's personal and social well-being. They assume that the more human capital one possesses, the better would be his or her personal and social well-being. Caring is therefore naturally equated with human capital formation. For a thorough presentation and critique of human capital theory, see Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961; and Baptiste, 1994; Blaug, 1972; Maglen, 1990 respectively.

Advocates of human capital formation do not possess a pedagogy of disempowerment. Why should they? Most of them seem to live in a world where true conflicts and real enemies do not exist. Some deny scarcity, acting as if there is always an infinite supply of every good thing. In such a world there is no need to directly address human conflict. "Market forces" will take care of that. Others deny greed and evil. "Illiteracy" is presumed to be the cause of all our social maladies. People are poor, sick, homeless, etc., because they lack the necessary marketable skills—a situation that is easily corrected through provision of the requisite human capital (Carnevale, 1991). Irreconcilable differences do not exist among human beings. Conflict will eventually vanish through enlightened discourse. Every human transaction can be a "win/win" situation, because our differences are due to ignorance, not vice. In this romantic world there is certainly no need to disempower anyone.

Caring as Self-Improvement. Some adult educators express their caring by seeking to fundamentally alter the state of individuals—be it physical, psychological, spiritual, etc. These are the concerns typically addressed in adult development literature (Cranton, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Mezirow, 1991). I call members of this group self-improvement advocates. I distinguish them from the first group, because it is possible to increase one's marketability without caring much about fundamentally altering his or her state of being. As the literature on adult development shows, important differences exist among self-improvement advocates. For instances, they differ on what state of the individual they choose to alter. Some focus on the physical, others on the cognitive, psycho-social, emotional, spiritual, and so on. Perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1985, 1991) typifies the self-improvement ethic in adult education. Its primary function is to alter in fundamental ways the perspective of the individual (hopefully for better). Mezirow vacillates on this point. But I agree with his critics, that although positive social change might be a serendipitous outcome of perspective transformation, it is not a requirement of the theory (Collard and Laws, 1989).

Self-improvement proponents do not possess a pedagogy of disempowerment. Theirs is what Newman (1994) calls introspective activism—we can change the world, presumably, by changing ourselves. Newman depicts this view with these words:

The revolution starts with us.

We can begin by cleaning up our own back yard.

We need to achieve an inner peace if we are to strive for world peace.

We must educate ourselves before we can educate other (p. 103).

He goes on to caution that "these are seductive and comforting phrases, but they can deflect us from laying blame where blame is due, and from taking effective, coordinated action to oppose those who do us and others harm" (Newman, p. 103). It seems to me that the entire cadre of self-improvement advocates is plagued by this deflection.

Caring as empowering our allies. Some adult educators express their caring by striving to empower their allies--members of groups to which they belong or identify. I belong to this camp. We vary widely. Firstly, we differ in the groups we choose to serve. Some of us focus on groups defined by race/ethnicity, others on groups defined by socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, political ideology, and so on. We also differ in our definition of empowerment. For some of us empowerment is equated with improved marketability, for others its self-improvement, for others its collective empowerment, critical consciousness, and so on. Among our ranks are liberals, conservatives, feminists, critical pedagogists, marxist, and a host of others. (Baptiste, 1994; Freire, 1973; Johnson-Bailey, 1995; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Shor, 1992; Tisdell, 1993). What unites us is a commitment to empowering members of the group(s) with which we identify. We know we have enemies. Usually our allies are defined in opposition to our enemies—afrocentrism against eurocentrism, feminism against patriarchy, the Right verses the Left, and so on. But in most cases, opposition to the enemy is actualized indirectly through empowering our allies.

Paulo Freire epitomizes this approach. He is very cognizant of enemies. In all of his writings, Freire painstakingly points out the faces of oppression: custodians of banking education, corporate capitalism, European imperialism and colonialism, scientism, racism, the Right, and so on (Freire, 1970, 1973). Nonetheless, nowhere in Freire can one find an articulated pedagogy for disempowering the enemy. Like most educators within this group, Freire concentrates primarily on empowering his allies—usually the oppressed. In fact, Freire seems to believe that empowered, critically conscious allies will eventually transform their enemies into friends. In Freire's world, ultimately, there are no losers. Everyone wins in the end. In this utopian, humanist vision, who needs a pedagogy of disempowerment? Newman sums it up well:

"[Freire's reference to] the Right must refer, in part at least, to people who maintain their positions, property and privilege through terror. Yet somehow Freire appears to believe that these oppressors, too, are trapped, and that *it is up to the oppressed* to release them...."

Freire, then, appears to maintain a faith in the potential goodness of all people, and he envisages a utopia in which revolutionary leaders, the people, and presumably, some at least of the former oppressors, are liberated and, through a process of cultural synthesis, create a conscientized, post-revolutionary culture" (Newman, pp. 35, 36 emphasis in original).

With apocalyptic fervor, but lacking the harsh day of judgement, Freire announces his utopian vision.

Yet it is—paradoxical though it may seem—precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that the gesture of love may be found ... As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of their oppression. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught....The contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man who is neither oppressor nor oppressed—man in the process of liberation (Freire, 1972, pp. 32-33 cited in Newman p. 33-36).

If we could only succeed in empowering our allies, everyone will win in the end—so it seems. How then does Freire construe evil? He construes it as ignorance or mistakes. For him, the violence of the oppressor and the resultant mob reaction of the oppressed (massification) are finally all attributable to uncriticality—naivete, intransitivity, and semi-transitivity (Freire 1973: 19). With Freire, as with most adult educators, free, enlightened humans are accorded absolute goodness. Evil, it would seem, is either the product of ignorance, or coercion. It's as if those who really know the good will always do it. Accordingly, it is assumed that if we are not doing the good, it is either because we do not really know it, or are not really free to pursue it. On the basis of such reasoning, the ethical responsibility of the educator is to foster enlightened freedom. People, it is assumed, will act right once they are free, critical thinkers. Vice is recast as ignorance and mistakes, and the ethical responsibility of educators recast in epistemic terms, i.e., the development of critical consciousness.

No doubt there are people who do us wrong out of ignorance, for whom conscientization is a fitting remedy. But I suspect that there are people who hurt and harm others knowingly and willfully. Such individuals must be disempowered, neutralized, silenced. And we fool ourselves if we believe that we will neutralize our enemies simply by empowering our foes. Freire's experiences in Guinea Bissau stand as a shining illustration of this folly (Freire, 1983). What his experience teaches us is that, although mutually reinforcing, these two goals—empowering our friends, and disempowering our enemies, require distinctly different foci and activities. Adult educators have done a pretty good job of addressing the first—empowering our allies. We are yet to develop and articulate a pedagogy for disempowering our enemies.

By pedagogy of disempowerment I am referring to more than theories of resistance (Giroux, 1983, Williams, 1961). Theories of resistance, it seems to me, are merely coping mechanisms. They simply explain the survival strategies

employed by our allies. In some cases, those same strategies leave our allies more disenfranchised and powerless. In short, resistance theories offer very little by way of neutralizing or immobilizing our enemies.

Conclusion: Towards a Pedagogy of Ethical Disempowerment

I believe that it is ethical to disempower our enemies—those who, wittingly, do us and others harm. I no longer share the humanist conviction that it is always possible to rehabilitate our oppressors. Where oppression is due to ignorance, rehabilitation may suffice. But where oppression is due to vice we have no ethical recourse but to stop, disempower, silence the perpetrators. Social activists have always understood this. Asks unionist struggling to squelch the insatiable appetite of power-hungry capitalists; ask environmentalists who are working on the front line to save our rain forests from greedy predators; ask women activists who see every day the ravages done to women by tyrannizing men. These and countless other activists know that the enemy is real, dangerous, and beyond rehabilitation.

Newman (1994) has provided an important first step toward building a pedagogy of ethical disempowerment. He has dispelled the myth that we don't really have enemies, has begun to define them for us. Standing on his shoulders, we must now articulate that pedagogy. This articulation, I believe, should begin by shifting our pedagogical lenses from the classroom to social movements. People in formal classrooms are usually too nice and politically correct to engage in ethical disempowerment. On the contrary, attempts to disempower the enemy occurs daily in social movements, therefore it is to those movements we must turn. Given their busy schedule, and action orientation, however, most social activists do not have the time nor inclination to synthesize and articulate their pedagogies in use. But I believe that reflection and articulation lend greater potency to our actions—the result is usually improved practice.

We must conduct critical examinations of the works of social activists. I say critical, because I do not assume that activists are ethical in all of their dealings; nor do I assume that all of their pedagogical practices are sound or efficacious. A critical assessment of their practices will allow us to identify those elements that are ethical and sound. A good place to begin might be with popular educators (working with disenfranchised groups) who are also self-identified adult educators. These educators are most likely to see the value, not only of disempowering their enemies, but also of *articulating* a pedagogy of disempowerment. Our examination should occur in diverse settings and contexts—workplace, communities, schools (not classrooms), etc. We should not assume that what works for unionists in South Africa will suffice in Spain; we should not assume that what works for environmentalists in Brazil, will work for environmentalists in the US; we should not assume that what works for women activists will work for activists fighting racial discrimination, and so on.

Secondly, a pedagogy of ethical disempowerment requires a radical re-conceptualization of our practice. This re-conceptualization demands a shift away from curriculum and program planning models rooted in sterile, a-political theories of organizational behavior so prevalent in industrial psychology, business management and human resource development (Boyle, 1981; Gerloff, 1985; Galbraith, et. al., 1997). I contend that though we may have discarded the jargon of scientific management, adult educators continue to practice it. We need, therefore, to cast off the shackles of scientific management and all its technicist trappings, and embrace theories and planning models which emphasize political mobilization—theories which construe practice, not as discrete sets of technical and psychological competencies, but as deeply complex political acts, involving arduous negotiation of interests (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Fisher & Kling, 1993; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Kriesi, 1993).

I have only scratched the surface of this issue. Being a victim, myself, of the utopian, humanist vision I here criticize, I have only just begun to shake off its mantle. Much is left to be done. I solicit the aid of those of you who have gone beyond me in this journey. Together, I am confident that we can succeed in articulating and implementing a pedagogy of ethical disempowerment. Our world badly needs one!

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